

Student Eloquence -- in Brazil

By Walter Swetnam

Brazilian students are fond of speaking in public. Generally speaking, they have a facility of expression and a remarkable freedom from that timidity before an audience that is the curse -- or is it a blessing? -- of North American students. A friend of mine described them as bashless.

Our school is a junior college. Most pupils come to us at the beginning of high school, and stay the full seven years; but Valdir came this year as a transfer for the first college year. He came well recommended as a student, and soon proved his worth. He has an unusual gift for oratory. On the occasion of the arrival of the first contingent of Brazilian troops returning from Europe, when the whole school met in assembly to hear the announcement that it was a holiday, Valdir, apparently without any preparation whatever, got up and delivered himself of a mighty oration. I should have found it hard to say, when he finished, just what he had said, but then I am a little given to inattention; but everybody agreed that it was a wonderful oration, and quite brought down the house.

English is a required subject for Brazilian students, both in high school and in college. Some few of the students learn to speak and write it effectively, but the majority make no more progress than the majority of North American students make in French or Spanish. However, in the first year of college they are supposed to be able to do elementary composition work in English. I assigned as a theme the writing of an autobiography.

Valdir said that not enough had happened to him to make an autobiography interesting, and asked leave to write about his career instead, to which I agreed. He wrote it first in Portuguese and then set out to translate it into English. He asked me for help in translating a phrase, and before I knew it, I was locked in a life and death struggle, out of which the first paragraph finally emerged in more or less understandable English. Then I struck. "This can't be said in English", I told him, "you'll have to find a simpler style."

But Valdir was not to be outdone. He labored manfully, and finally brought in his theme, with the rather significant title of "My Words". Here it is; it's too good to keep.

My Words

I am a student but I am yet in the beginning of my studies that will be as deeply fraught with possibilities as expectantly profound.

Notwithstanding I can say that the contingency of life in the renovation of the things and the renovation of life in the contingency of the things, being the agents of great influence in the moral pattern of each personality, conscient or not of his active performance or of his necessary attribution to the human progress, whether ethical or intellectually, they constitute modalities of the uninterrupted sequence to which the time and the ambient conditions to the spirit of combatif or the accommodable disposition of each one.

So, demonstrating a struggle and labor, I will attain my highest wish -- to be a physician.

Yes, because Medicine, to me, is the balsam with which the alleviation is ministered in one who suffers, constituting to him a great hope and happiness; it is the embracing of the science, magnanimous and friendly, with the patient to banish the suffering; it is a divine source that which makes life reappear, the sickness flee and the man progress.

I gave him a B on it -- surely so much effort deserved something. But I was forced to pencil on the margin, "É muito profundo; não posso compreender."